



Continuities and changes regarding minorities in Somalia

Markus V. Hoehne

To cite this article: Markus V. Hoehne (2015) Continuities and changes regarding minorities in Somalia, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38:5, 792-807, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2014.901547](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.901547)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.901547>



Published online: 14 Apr 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 771



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Continuities and changes regarding minorities in Somalia

Markus V. Hoehne

(Received 9 September 2013; accepted 25 February 2014)

Somali society has long since been considered ethnically homogenous. The better known pastoral-nomadic section of society was perceived as representative. Politics and economy throughout the twentieth century were controlled by ‘majority’ clan members. ‘Minority group’ members were generally marginalized and sometimes even oppressed and exploited; during the civil war from 1991 onwards, they became easy victims for majority group militias. Previously respected religious or occupational ‘castes’ also fell victim to the general insecurity and lawlessness during that period. The civil war not only had enormous negative consequences for minority group members; in some cases, it increased the self-consciousness of minority groups and led to the formation of new identities that, in combination with international organizations and their human rights policies, provided members of certain groups with chances for resettlement or made them actively demand more rights.

Keywords: minorities; inequality; Somalia; civil war; Bantu; Asharaf; Midgaan

Introduction

Somalis have long since been represented as a homogenous ethnic group with a common myth of origin (patrilineal descent from a common ancestor), common language (Somali), common religion (Sunni Islam) and common customs (particularly related to pastoral-nomadism and camel husbandry) (Lewis 1961; Laitin and Samatar 1987, xvi). The social organization in clan-families, clans, sub-clans and so forth, in seemingly perennial opposition to each other, is still perceived by many as the distinctive feature of Somalis (Luling 2006; Mohamed 2007). Critics argued that economic and social inequalities and hierarchies were ignored, and the myth of origin of ‘the Somali’ was perpetuated, contributing to a misrepresentation and flawed analysis of Somali society and politics (Samatar 1992; Ahmed 1995; Besteman 1996).

While the clan is still a relevant category among Somalis, this article seeks to diversify the perspective on Somali society by focusing on so-called minority groups. It uses secondary sources, insights gained during field research in northern Somalia between 2002 and 2013, and information collected during telephone interviews with Somali asylum seekers in the UK to outline the key features of these groups and locate them adequately in Somali history and politics, including their current situation in times of war. This article first outlines the various groups, distinguishing ‘ethnic minorities’, ‘occupational groups’ and ‘religious minorities’. It then describes the situation of these groups in the twentieth century, before it analyses the impact of the

civil war on them. A key development here is that the fighting in Somalia from 1991 onwards had an 'identity formation effect'. Some minority groups began to understand themselves as distinct groups and were understood by, for example, international humanitarian organizations as such only in the face of systematic persecution by other Somali groups, which then were understood as 'majority groups'. Under international law, including regulations in place in the USA and the EU, an individual becomes eligible for asylum when he/she can exhibit a well-founded fear of being persecuted due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. This again had an effect on the identity of minority groups. Subsequently, the article outlines the situation of minority group members in Somaliland and Puntland in northern Somalia, where their persecution during the civil war was not systematic but where structural marginalization and 'segregation' of communities prevail. The conclusion highlights recent dynamics regarding the partial empowerment of minority groups in contemporary Somali politics, which is, however, outweighed by the continued predicament of members of these groups in Somali society.

Occupational differentiation, adoption and social stratification

Virginia Luling stressed in 1984 that 'Current published material on them [minority groups] is extremely meagre; they have hardly ever been studied directly or enabled to give their own account of themselves' (Luling 1984, 52). In 1904, Kirk wrote on 'outcast' groups in northern Somalia. He mentioned the basic distinction between *gob* (gentry) and *sab* (low-born; outcast). The *sab* were divided into Tumaal, Midgaan and Yibir.¹ These groups were 'scattered people of no fixed home, who often attach themselves in small groups or families ... as servants, to the various Somali tribes all over the country' (Kirk 1904, 91). Kirk reported that these groups were not recognized as Somali by other Somalis and that Somalis belonging to the category of *gob* would not eat or intermarry with them. They formed endogamous groups attached to others as clients. Still, regarding language, physical features and culture, Somalis 'proper' and the outcasts in northern Somalia were quite similar (Kirk 1904, 92).

The Midgaan mostly worked as hunters, shoemakers, tanners, well diggers and water carriers for their hosts. The Tumaal were traditionally blacksmiths and carpenters. The Yibir were known as tanners and also 'sorcerers' and 'witches'. The Yibir claimed Arabic origin, according to Kirk. They possibly resided in northern Somalia before the Somali 'proper' arrived and were then conquered and subjugated by the latter. Some Yibir and other Somalis even argued that the Yibir were actually related to the Hebrews of the Middle East (Helander 1995, 21).

Lewis (1998 [1955]) confirmed Kirk's account and added that in southern Somalia, particularly among the Digil and Merifle, the outcasts were known as *boon* (Lewis 1998 [1955], 51). In the south, *sab* was considered to be the ancestor of those groups commonly referred to as Raxanweyn, who distinguish themselves from the outcasts (hence, *sab* carried a different connotation in the south and in the north). In general, the outcast or occupational groups 'have no recognized genealogy of their own' and their rights (e.g. in case of homicide) and political representation were mediated

through their patrons (who belonged to majority clan groups) (Lewis 1998 [1955], 52).

Besides Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir, Lewis mentioned several groups that were specialized in religious services:

In clan genealogies, religious groups frequently appear as lineages incorporated into the clan structure of the tribe. Names like Sheikhal [Sheekhaal], Asharaf, Faki, Fogi, etc., words denoting religious men or priests, indicate priestly sections when they occur in tribal genealogies. (Lewis 1998 [1955], 149)

In Lewis's view, these groups denoted 'extraneous aggregates', which originally were dependants of majority groups 'into which they were admitted as clients (*arifa*, *shegat* [*sheegat*]) through the grant of land made to them' (Lewis 1998 [1955], 149). Intermarriage between them and their patrons was permitted and even esteemed, since the members of the religious groups were considered especially 'blessed'. The concept of *sheegat*, which was mentioned by Lewis, can be translated as 'adoption'.

Much of the work in Somali studies in the twentieth century concentrated on the politics, history and culture of the so-called majority groups. Among professional anthropologists, Virginia Luling was the first to systematically advance the study of marginal groups. She stressed that despite the well-known egalitarian character of Somali society, 'some of its members were much less equal than the rest' (Luling 1984, 39). She divided Somali minorities, whom she called 'the other Somali', into two broad groups: the occupational castes, who lived as clients among the majority groups (the 'noble' Somali) throughout Somalia; and the farming villagers of the inter-riverine area in southern Somalia. Luling outlined that the:

occupational caste groups were scattered through the clan system, as weavers and potters as well as smiths, hunters and tanners, each small group having its own name. The words "Midgaan" and "Yibir" appear not to be known, and Tumaal (from Somali *tum*, meaning "to beat", "to hammer") is generally simply the name of an occupation, not of a descent group. (Luling 1984, 41)

Frequently, these three groups were subsumed in the south under the term *Gacan Walaal* (referring to manual workers like shoemakers, smiths, tanners, etc.). There were also other occupational groups in the south, such as the Booni hunters. Besides them, Luling (1984, 42) mentioned the farming villagers 'who once lived under the nominal patronage of the pastoral clans and in alliance with them, but [now exist] essentially as independent communities'. All these people had a low status with respect to the main Somali population, and they were excluded from intermarriage with the majority population.

Regarding the origin of the occupational castes, Luling argued that they belonged to the Cushitic speakers residing in the Horn of Africa, which is the earliest traceable population in the region. Most probably, they became established as distinct groups through functional differentiation. Separation, even social segregation, ritualized division of functions and the establishment of an 'out-group' within the larger Somali society was a common cultural feature among various peoples in the Horn. This

means that, contrary to the legend about the 'foreign' background of some of the outcasts, Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir, as well as their counterparts in southern Somalia, were Somali by origin. There were no substantial physical, linguistic or cultural differences between the occupational castes and the pastoral-nomads (Luling 1984, 43–44).

Regarding the farming villagers in southern Somalia, Luling came to the conclusion that they were clearly separate in origin from the rest of the Somali. Physically, they differed visibly from the pastoral-nomads and they originally spoke Bantu languages. Many of them, for example, Gosha/Jareer, were descendants of run away slaves. Eastern Africans, such as from today's Tanzania, had been brought into the Somali peninsula in the nineteenth century as slaves, passing through on the way to the Arab peninsula or being sold along the southern Somali coast as plantation workers (Cassanelli 1982; Luling 1984, 47). Some of these non-Somali, Bantu-speaking farmers in the south, however, probably had already resided in the area before Somali pastoral-nomads settled there or arrived simultaneously with the Somali groups. Since they occupied different ecological niches, they could have coexisted without competition (Luling 1984, 48). Over time, the farming villagers – ex-slaves or free farmers – were integrated in the larger Somali society, but with an inferior status. Luling stressed the complexities of historical and social relations between Somali pastoral-nomads, occupational castes and originally non-Somali farming communities. In most cases it was not the physical appearance or any 'objective' marker, but socially constructed claims to a particular descent or origin that provided 'evidence' of a person's belonging to a majority or minority group (Luling 1984, 51).

Another specific group are the Benaadiri of the southern Somali coast. Among them were the so-called Gibil Cad ('light-skinned') groups. Ethnographic, historical and linguistic research confirmed that among the Gibil Cad of the Benaadir coast, Arabic or Iranian ancestors played a decisive role (Luling 2010, 302). Benaadiri comes from 'Bandar', which is the Persian word for 'port'; the name Benaadiri is a purely geographical reference and does not imply any 'Benaadiri descent' equivalent to the descent line of majority clans. Many of the coastal dwellers were traders by profession. They lived as an endogamous group and had their own dialect, which is markedly different from 'standard' Somali. There were also Gibil Cad communities further inland, around Afgooye, for example. They traced their origin back to Arabia and remained endogamous. In contrast to the coastal Gibil Cad groups, they practised farming and took on many aspects of the culture and language of the majority groups in the area (Luling 2010, 302).

Among the best known of the Benaadiri groups were Reer Xamar (Reer Hamar)² and Asharaf. Traditionally, the Reer Xamar resided in the two oldest districts of Mogadishu, Xamarweyne and Shangani, and spoke a particular dialect not understood by most other Somalis. Besides being traders, they also worked as goldsmiths (Landinfo 2009). The Asharaf trace their descent to Fatima, Prophet Maxamed's daughter, and her husband Ali (the nephew of the Prophet). They were considered especially blessed and worked traditionally as Koran teachers. They were mostly endogamous but not (yet) of inferior status. This changed with the outbreak of the civil war (see below).

There was also a small minority of Somali Christians. It is worth noting, however, that these Somali Christians initially did not constitute a persecuted or inferior minority. Similar to the Benaadiri groups of Arabic or other foreign origin, they were victimized only during the civil war, particularly when the militant Islamists came to power in the early 2000s. Christianity had been introduced by European missionaries under colonial protection in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, due to the stiff and sometimes armed resistance of Somalis to anything diverting from the 'correct faith' (Sunni Islam), missionary activities were soon interdicted by the colonial governments. The Italian cathedral in Mogadishu, which mostly served the Italian administrators, remained a visible sign for Christianity in Somalia. In postcolonial Somalia, a small community of Somali converts existed clandestinely in the country.

The Gosha (or Jareer) have already been mentioned as a significant minority group in southern Somalia. The name Gosha means 'dense jungle' and denotes the forested banks of the Jubba River. This is where fugitive slaves hid and established their free communities. The jungle provided refuge and, due to the abundance of arable land, a living as farmers. The name of their residential area became their group name. However, in Somali the ex-slaves of eastern African origin were also known as Jareer. This is a racist term and refers to the 'hard' [curly] hair of the 'African' ex-slaves in contrast to the 'soft' hair of the supposedly more 'Arab' Somalis. In the 1990s, the Gosha/Jareer became also known as Somali-Bantu, since some of them preserved their original Bantu language and other aspects of their 'African' heritage. Those Bantu speakers, who had not been brought as slaves to Somalia but had been residing in the area before the arrival of the pastoral-nomadic groups, were also subsumed under this category. The Gosha/Jareer did not intermarry with pastoral-nomadic Somali. Once slavery had been officially abolished by the Italians in southern Somalia in 1904, many freed slaves joined the existing Gosha/Jareer communities.

Despite the abolishment of slavery, the Gosha/Jareer were persistently considered to be of lower status as ex-slaves, 'blacks' and former infidels (converted to Islam only by their masters) (Besteman 1995, 44–49; Besteman 1999, 80). The inferior status of the Gosha/Jareer was perpetuated in postcolonial times by the Somali political elites. Formally Somali, they were effectively excluded from political power and most state resources. However, they prospered as farmers until the state introduced the land reform and rural development schemes in the mid-1970s. By establishing a complex registration system for land titles, many of the Gosha/Jareer farmers were disowned and members of pastoral-nomadic clans, and particularly urban elites in Mogadishu, became the formal landowners (Besteman 1999, 181–184, 203–223). The Gosha/Jareer continued to work on the land, but increasingly as dependent farmers.

The last group to be mentioned here are the Bajuni. They resided in small communities along the Indian Ocean and on some of the larger offshore islands between Kismayo (Somalia) and Mombasa (Kenya). The Bajuni are a small group of only a few thousand people. They are of mixed Arab, Bantu, Somali and perhaps Malaysian origin and their mother tongue is Kibajuni, which is a dialect of Swahili (Cassanelli 1995).

Most of the members of the mentioned groups were subsumed under the umbrella of Somali identity for much of the twentieth century. They spoke Somali at least as a 'second language', adhered to a similar culture and were Sunni Muslims. Linguistic and cultural differences were most prevalent between the Gosha/Jareer and Somali majority groups/dominant clans. Many Gosha/Jareer actually spoke the Af-Maay dialect common in the inter-riverine area. However, Af-Maxaa, the dialect spoken by the pastoral-nomadic groups, was officially declared as 'standard Somali' in the early 1970s. Some Gosha/Jareer also spoke their old Bantu language, such as Kizigula. Everyday stigmatization and unequal treatment of minority group members persisted in postcolonial Somalia (the country became independent in 1960). This particularly concerned those who were visibly different, such as Gosha/Jareer, but also other 'weak' groups (weakness resulting from lack of numbers and lack of access to political resources).

Minority-majority group distinctions seemingly lost relevance in the early 1970s, when 'clanism' was officially banned under the socialist rule of Maxamed Siyad Barre (1969–1991) and even the mentioning of one's clan was considered a criminal offence. Officially, every Somali was equal. Barre deliberately promoted certain members of minority groups such as Midgan and Tumaal into high political and military positions. Beneath the surface, however, the exclusion from economic and political resources continued, and particularly Gosha/Jareer were treated as second-class citizens. Menkhaus found that for the farmers along the Jubba, 'the state served not as an instrument of protection and rule of law ..., but rather as an instrument by which powerful ethnic Somalis expropriated [their] land, not by force of arms but with bureaucracy and legal documents' (Menkhaus 2010, 97). When the government faced the armed opposition of certain guerrilla groups from 1979 onwards, President Barre armed loyal groups to fight side by side with the national army against the 'rebels' (Compagnon 1992). Minority group members also joined this struggle for power on the side of the government. Many of them were grateful to Barre for having enhanced their prestige and accepted them as 'full Somalis' (interview with Sarah Cali Cadaawe, Hargeysa, 17 May 2009). Notably, minority group members had been scattered throughout Somalia in the past and were attached as clients to majority clans. They thus also partly accepted their patrons' clan identity and culture, including language or dialect. A clear distinction between minority and majority groups existed with regard to social status and access to economic and political resources. However, most minority group members had not yet developed a conscious and distinct identity of their own. This changed with the dynamics of violence that unfolded from 1991 onwards (Helander 1995, 23).

Civil war

Maxamed Siyad Barre lost his grip on power in January 1991. The Somali state collapsed and civil war ensued, which pitted clan militias led by warlords against each other. In this context, the situation of minority group members worsened dramatically. They were the weakest in Somali society, since they were relatively few in numbers (except the Gosha/Jareer) and not armed. Regarding the 'numbers', however, one needs to be careful. Some argue that the so-called minority groups actually constituted – added

together or at least when added together in certain localities – the majority. Up to 20% of the entire Somali population of around nine million were estimated to belong to minority groups (Hill 2010, 9). Yet, they were splintered within society and lacked political and military organization. Unlike the majority clans, the minority groups had no tradition of fighting – only the Gosha had engaged in a rebellion against slavery in the early twentieth century (Helander 1995, 22); but this did not result in the development of a ‘warrior ethos’ so typical for pastoral-nomadic Somali groups. In fact, members of the minority groups, including the caste groups, had always relied on majority clans for protection (Hill 2010, 7).

During the civil war, this protective relationship was dissolved and frequently turned into its opposite, with majority group militias preying on the weak elements in society, such as women, children, the elderly and minority group members. Militias belonging to the Hawiye and the Darood clan-families plundered property and farms and enslaved boys and men as workers and girls and women for housework and sexual services (Prunier 1995). Raping and killing became endemic. This also concerned majority groups in conflict. However, their members had a chance to defend themselves and demand their rights, since they were armed or were protected by a militia.³ The predicament of the unarmed and unorganized minority groups was encapsulated in the Somali expression *loo ma ooyin* (‘not cried for’, ‘not mourned’).

Many of those minority group members who survived the early phase of the civil war fled Somalia. The first stations of their journey were usually refugee camps in Kenya or homes in Eastleigh, the Somali quarter of Nairobi. Some fled within Somalia. From the mid-1990s onwards, Somaliland and later Puntland in northern Somalia had emerged as state-like entities that provided their inhabitants with relative peace, although this did not yet mean an end to structural discrimination and stigmatization of minority group members there (see below). A considerable number of minority group members remained in (southern) Somalia. They did not have the financial means to flee; were too old, too sick, or too severely disabled to move; or hoped that things would soon improve. However, their suffering continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Report on Minority Groups in Somalia, Joint British, Danish and Dutch Fact-finding Mission to Nairobi 2000, 20).

Besides these general dynamics of violence concerning minority groups, different groups suffered differently and at different times. Certain minority groups suffered more than others. Among those suffering most were the Gosha/Jareer. Between 1991 and 1992, clan militias fought heavily to control farmland in the south. They looted property and abused civilians who lived as farmers along the rivers Jubba and Shabelle and in between.⁴ The fighting over the farmland (which not only concerned the Bantu but also the Raxanweyn agro-pastoralists in the regions Bay and Bakool) contributed to the escalation of a periodic drought in the area into a famine in 1992. In this war-induced famine around 300,000 people died, many of them Raxanweyn, but also many Gosha/Jareer (De Waal 1997, 163–173). From October 1992 onwards, Gosha/Jareer were fleeing en masse to Kenya, where soon more than 10,000 of them lived in several refugee camps that were later merged into Dadab camp (Van Lehman and Eno 2003, 10; Hill 2010, 10). In the refugee camps, the Gosha/Jareer began to organize themselves politically and tried to increase their stake in Somali politics. Activists founded the Somali African Muki Organization (SAMO). However, this

attempt to give Gosha/Jareer a voice failed, because the UN together with the USA had started a humanitarian intervention in southern Somalia in November 1992, ignoring the Gosha/Jareer and giving precedence to the warlords as 'political leaders' in Somalia. Another dynamic that greatly influenced the fate of the Gosha/Jareer was the fact that some of them spoke a Bantu language, and the UN and humanitarian organizations in the refugee camps began to refer to them as 'Somali Bantu' (Helander 1995, 23; Menkhaus 2010, 99). This, together with the experience of long-term exclusion and recent, extreme suffering, fostered the formation of a collective identity among Gosha/Jareer that gained significance outside Somalia. The Somali Bantu were quickly identified by the UN and others as being among the most vulnerable people and therefore gained preferential access to humanitarian aid. Some Somali Bantu sought to capitalize on their 'African' heritage (which had been a reason for their stigmatization in Somalia) and applied for 'resettlement' in their ancestral home areas in Tanzania (Declich 2010, 174–176). In 1999, the US government accepted up to 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees for resettlement. In this way, being Somali Bantu turned out to be advantageous, since it potentially provided a 'ticket' out of misery.

However, many Somali Bantu continued to suffer in the refugee camps, where they were excluded by other Somalis and resided in areas that were unprotected and vulnerable to nightly bandit attacks from inside and outside the camp. In 2004, around 10,000 Somali Bantu finally resettled to the USA only to face new exclusion and racism there. This was partly due to their image as impoverished Somalis, but was also related to their particularly inferior status in Somali society, which had prevented them from receiving proper education (Besteman 2012). Those Gosha/Jareer or Somali Bantu who remained inside Somalia after 1991 were often forced into a slave-like status by militias belonging to majority clans, who made them work on the local banana plantations (Prunier 1995, 3).

Another group that suffered greatly were the Reer Xamar. They were a much smaller group than, for example, the Gosha/Jareer. Their property was looted and the 'white-skinned' girls and women belonging to this group were raped. Many girls were also forced into marriages with militia members. While these forced marriages certainly violated the rights of the girls, they provided the Reer Xamar families involved with some kind of protection in the longer run from their in-laws belonging to majority clans (Gundel 2009, 17–18; Ingiriis and Hoehne 2013, 315).

One minority group that, according to Cassanelli, fared somewhat well despite the civil war (at least for a time) were the Bajuni. They did not suffer particularly heavy attacks in the early 1990s because their maritime mobility helped them to avoid many dangers. Cassanelli (1995, n.p.) found: 'Some even earned money – as much as US \$400 per passenger, transporting refugees from places like Brava and Kismayu to Kenya in their fishing boats.' In the longer run, however, Bajuni also suffered due to their inferior social and political status. Many of them eventually fled to refugee camps in Kenya, particularly around Mombasa.

The worst times for minority group members were certainly the first two years of the civil war in the south. This was the time of massive inter-clan fighting, clan-cleansing and famine. It was followed by a calmer period from November 1992 to May 1995, when the UN- and US-led humanitarian intervention forces (UNOSOM

and UNITAF) were in southern Somalia. While the fighting never stopped, the intensity of the violence was reduced in places such as Mogadishu and its surroundings, where the foreign troops were concentrated. Minority group members as well as most other Somalis enjoyed relative security at that time, but with the withdrawal of the international 'peacekeepers' the minority groups became vulnerable again. Interviews with asylum seekers belonging to Somali minority groups conducted by the author between 2005 and 2013 showed that those who remained in Somalia after 1991 were often subjected to local protection rackets, particularly between 1995 and 2006. In this context, clan militias controlling certain areas would demand regular payments from shop owners or manual workers belonging to minority groups. The amounts were small, but taken together the revenue extracted from a neighbourhood could provide a small militia group with money for *qaad* (a mild stimulant chewed by many Somali men, particularly soldiers and militiamen) and other incidentals. If people refused to pay, their homes and shops were attacked. Minority group members could not rely on clan protection against such attacks. In this way, local economies of war were established that held minority group members in a status of permanent dependency on the will of majority group members in their areas and generated some regular income for the militiamen. The regular extraction of money also prevented many minority group members from saving money for an eventual flight.

Another temporarily calm period for minority group members was June to December 2006. In those six months, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) controlled first Mogadishu, after its forces had defeated the warlord militias there, and then soon afterwards much of southern Somalia. The UIC followed an Islamist ideology that officially disregarded clan belonging.⁵ The UIC was concerned with law and order. According to a woman from a majority group, who was married to a Reer Xamar man and whose children lived in Mogadishu, the situation was better under the UIC. Looting and robbing declined (interview with Sarah Cali Cadaawe, Hargeysa, 17 May 2009). Interviews with minority group members seeking asylum in Europe after new violence had escalated in southern Somalia from 2007 onwards also confirmed that the time under the UIC had been better. The Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Immigration Service confirmed that:

the UIC provided the minorities with some kind of protection and freedom. There was an enormous relief among the minorities when the UIC took over in June 2006. Many members of minorities were accorded prominent or high positions in the UIC administration, in the education and health sectors. (Joint fact-finding mission by the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Immigration Service, 14–27 March 2007, 20)

However, these 'moments of freedom' could not be enjoyed to the same extent everywhere. While some UIC fighters had a genuine Islamic agenda that could be perceived as less discriminatory against minorities, others were simply warlord militias turned Islamic militias who continued their same old violent and criminal ways under the cover of the UIC.

The UIC was rejected by the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its allies. The TFG had been established in Kenya in 2004 and enjoyed the support of

the neighbouring states in the Horn of Africa, especially Ethiopia, and of the West. In Somalia, however, it was perceived as a government dominated by warlords and by members of the Darood clan-family; it had little internal support and could not govern effectively. It was not even welcome in Mogadishu, which was in the hands of members of the Hawiye clan-family – many of whom sympathized with the Islamists. Ethiopia strongly backed the TFG and committed its troops in late December 2006. It defeated the UIC within one week and installed the TFG in Mogadishu. Subsequently, out of the general resistance against the TFG and its foreign allies, Al Shabaab, a hard-core Islamist group that had separated from the UIC in late 2006, emerged as the strongest armed Islamist movement in the following years (Hoehne 2009a).

Between 2009 and 2011, Al Shabaab controlled much of southern Somalia. Its rule was based on a very strict and narrow interpretation of Islamic sharia and was perceived as extremely harsh by many Somalis. Moreover, the clan element was again prominently featured by Al Shabaab. On the one hand, Al Shabaab sought to transcend clan belonging through religious ideology; on the other, majority clans dominated the movement's leadership and certain minority groups, like Somali Bantu, were singled out for forcible recruitment (interview with Sarah Cali Cadaawe, Hargeysa, 17 May 2009; Hill 2010, 23). To make things more complex, there were also observers who stressed that traditionally underprivileged groups like Somali Bantu voluntarily joined Al Shabaab en masse since it offered them respect and upward social mobility, based on a common ideology. Minority group members who were caught up in the fighting found it hard to flee and move around to secure places, as they were not easily accepted in new surroundings. In contrast, refugees from majority clans had a wider social network and could rely on clan protection in different areas (Hill 2010, 20). The few Somali Christians in the country faced the most severe consequences if they were discovered by Al Shabaab. In some cases, Somali Bantu had converted to Christianity in protest against the mistreatment that they and their people had experienced at the hands of their 'Somali co-nationals' professing Islam. Between 2008 and 2012, Al Shabaab beheaded a number of Christian Somalis (Van Lehman and Eno 2003, 14; Hill 2010, 13). It is safe to argue that as in the early 1990s, the fighting in southern Somalia in 2007–12 impinged most negatively on the most vulnerable members of society – the members of minority groups.

Another interesting phenomenon related to the civil war that had a considerable impact on minority group 'identity' formation was the asylum regime, particularly in Europe. Before 1991, minority members had been scattered throughout Somalia and were attached as clients to majority clans; this had prevented group cohesion. According to international law, individuals enjoyed protection if they could prove that they were persecuted in their country of origin on the basis of their ethnic identity, faith, or political or sexual orientation. The Gosha/Jareer/Somali Bantu identity became a resource in the Kenyan refugee camps in the early 1990s, when the UN and humanitarian non-governmental organizations identified them as the 'most vulnerable' group and offered preferential access to assistance, and – finally – some Somali Bantu made it to Tanzania while others were allowed resettlement in the USA. Similar developments took place regarding other minority group identities with regard to asylum in Europe. In the early 2000s, when several European governments held the

view that the 'worst days' in Somalia were over and the transitional government was supposed to establish order in the country again, claiming minority group identity was a relatively secure way of being granted asylum in Europe. If a person could prove that he/she belonged either to Midgaan or Asharaf or a similar group, had faced systematic persecution in Somalia as a member of such a group, and would continue to be persecuted on return, then he/she had a relatively strong claim to asylum. Needless to say that members of majority groups hoping for a better life outside collapsed Somalia also tried to 'fake' a minority group identity to gain entrance into Europe. In this context, European governments became increasingly sophisticated in conducting 'identity checks' on Somali asylum seekers. Representatives of the Home Office in the UK, for example, referred intensively and increasingly to (sometimes ethnographic) reports about the Somali clan system and the culture of minority groups and relied on linguistic expertise to establish if a claimant exhibited the 'typical' features of the group that he/she claimed to belong to, including dialect. In some cases, claimants who belonged to a majority group managed to 'change' their identity successfully and gained access to Europe, as Midgaan or Asharaf, for example. On the surface, they had to uphold this identity in order to avoid negative consequences for their status in Europe. In this way, some minority groups 'proliferated' in Europe. Unfortunately, this had adverse effects for actual members of minority groups who were sometimes unable to pass the meticulous 'identity check' of European governments. The reasons were that they were less well versed in matters concerning their own identity due to illiteracy, structural discrimination or fear. The younger members of minority groups also lacked knowledge due to their upbringing in times of war which destroyed and scattered families and interrupted family traditions.

The situation of minority groups in Somaliland and Puntland

After 1991, the situation of minority group members in northern Somalia was slightly better than in the south. The northwest had already undergone a first round of civil war in the late 1980s. When local guerrillas took over the region in 1991, they called for a cease fire between the clans, some of which had sided with the government in Mogadishu. While President Barre was ousted from Mogadishu by other guerrillas and new fighting for power between these guerrillas erupted in the south, people in the northwest managed to establish peace and order through a series of local clan conferences. On this basis, Somaliland was founded as an 'independent' state, which did not enjoy international recognition but functioned as a *de facto* state. A few years later, a very similar process took place in the northeast, where Puntland was founded in 1998. In contrast to Somaliland, Puntland does not claim independence but considers itself an autonomous regional state that manages its own affairs until an effective government can be established in Mogadishu again (Hoehne 2009b).

The minority groups that traditionally resided in the north (mostly Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir) were thus spared the extreme violence from which the groups residing in the south had suffered since 1991. They were never systematically persecuted or oppressed by clan militias, as were, for example, the Gosha/Jareer along the Jubba in 1991 and 1992. However, the northern minority groups also suffered persistent discrimination and stigmatization by the pastoral-nomadic groups. Despite

the attempts of social reform under President Barre in the early 1970s, intermarriage between members of minority groups and those of majority clans was not accepted, Midgaan and others were prevented from owning land, and they were discriminated against in schools and in the labour market. Northern Somalis, who strongly adhered to a pastoral-nomadic ethos, had always been more conservative than people in the south. Yet, in some regards the situation of minorities improved after the fall of the old government. At least in Somaliland, Midgaan began to organize themselves and systematically sent their children to school. In Hargeysa, the capital of Somaliland, a private school for Midgaan and other minority group children was opened, financed through a donation by a prominent minority group member, the singer Mariam Mursal (Hill 2010, 18). The aim was first to shelter the children from harassment by children from majority groups, and second to empower Migdaan and others through education. Midgaan also gained representation in the Somaliland parliament, although it was only one out of 82 seats in the lower house; this seat was lost in the parliamentary elections in 2005. In 2012, the parliament rejected a proposal for a quota for women and minorities in parliament.

When the violence escalated in the south in the early 1990s and again after 2006, some minority group members from there also sought refuge in Somaliland. Those who had money or social connections could establish themselves, integrate to some degree, and enjoy peace. Others had to settle in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), which offered only very basic shelter and lacked appropriate infrastructure. People in IDP camps suffered from extreme poverty, and in particular women and children there were vulnerable to sexual abuse by men from local majority groups (Amnesty International 2009; Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Somalia 2010).

The situation in Puntland was worse. Members of the minority groups in the northeast had no political representation at all within the parliament. Hill (2010, 19) found that 'Puntland has provided little protection or assistance to minorities, whether communities long established in the region (mainly the occupational groups) or IDPs from southern Somalia (mostly Bantu, but with some occupational groups and Benadiri)'. The most vulnerable groups, particularly IDPs including many minority group members, suffered from insecurity and violence due to Islamist attacks, piracy and harsh reactions by regional security forces (Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Somalia 2010).

Conclusion

The image of Somali society as 'homogenous', characterized as a 'pastoral democracy' and segmentary lineage society in which an egalitarian ethos reigned, concealed the extent to which first Somali society had always been ethnically and culturally diverse (albeit still less diverse than other African societies), and second how little egalitarian the Somali society was from the perspective of the 'low castes' or 'outcasts'. Groups like the Gosh/Jareer/Somali Bantu were not small in numbers, but they were kept in a state of inferiority – first by force (until the early twentieth century), then by social and political exclusion as well as bureaucratic regulations and laws (until the 1980s), and again by force (under the warlords in the 1990s).

The revolutionary government under President Barre undertook initial steps towards a comprehensive social reform including the status of minority groups by outlawing any reference to clan and prohibiting marriage taboos between various groups. The success of this reform was limited. While a few individuals belonging to minority groups were elevated to top political and military positions and 'spectacular' intermarriages between members of minority and majority groups were staged in Mogadishu, in practice discrimination and seclusion continued – partly due to self-imposition and partly because it was enforced by supposedly superior groups against supposedly inferior groups.

The outbreak of the civil war in 1991 led to two contradictory developments. On the one hand, the predicament of minority group members worsened. When inter-group violence escalated to unprecedented levels, the previously existing relationships of dependency and protection were severed. *Sheegat* groups, who had thus far been looked down upon but had in some regards, particularly customary law, been integrated into stronger groups, suddenly faced looting, raping and killing by the various militias without protection from their erstwhile patrons. After 1991, the status of other groups also changed. Groups that had been attached to majority clans or were unattached and simply had been considered 'different' by the majority population, but were nevertheless respected for their religious knowledge and blessedness (Asharaf) or skills in trade and craftsmanship (Reer Xamar), became disrespected and unprotected. Undoubtedly, the Somali civil war caused mayhem among all Somalis, but minority group members were hit the hardest; they were the most vulnerable because they had never really been firmly integrated into the state apparatus and lacked the 'warrior ethos' of the pastoral nomadic groups, most of which had their own militias when the state collapsed.

On the other hand, the dynamics of violence in Somalia that triggered the massive flight of minority group members to neighbouring countries, Europe, North America or northern Somalia fostered the formation of conscious minority group identities. Encouraged and supported by humanitarian organizations, individual Bantu or Midgaan, for instance, defied the massive discrimination and victimization of their groups. By this process, minority group identities gained strength, which led to more internal cohesion. In the case of the Somali Bantu, being 'African' and not 'Somali' suddenly became an asset and facilitated resettlement to Tanzania or even the USA. Of course, such group identities also became attractive for members of majority clans who intended to 'fake' identities to make their way abroad. Some majority clan members thus turned into Asharaf or Midgaan, and those who succeeded had to live a 'split' identity abroad, keeping their real genealogy to themselves and possibly from their trusted social environment, always wary that the host society might investigate and discover their status. This might cause interesting social complications among the descendants of those identity-changers (Schlee and Schlee 2010, 6–7).

The social exclusion of minority group members by 'ordinary' Somalis facilitated their strong support of the UIC in 2006. The Islamists promised respect based on common religious/ideological convictions. While the rule of the Islamic courts was short-lived, after 2006 Al Shabaab continued the official ideology, which saw all Muslims (who adhered to the version of Islam that Al Shabaab propagated) as brothers and sisters. This attracted some minority group members to the movement.

However, clan chauvinism played a role in Al Shabaab, and in some cases minority group members were forcibly recruited or were used as cannon fodder.

Politically and with regard to education, minority group members made some headway, particularly in Somaliland, where, for example, Midgaan began to organize themselves and work for the improvement of their own communities in the absence of a government policy on minorities. In Puntland, the situation of minority group members remained dire. However, in the whole north, minority groups members were spared the massive violence that the minority groups in the south were exposed to. The Somali government in Mogadishu, under President Xasan Sheekh Maxamuud, who came to power in mid-2012, included two members of minority groups in the cabinet of 10 ministers. However, in the face of decades of the structural discrimination and violent oppression of minorities, this can only be seen as a small first step towards finding a way of dealing with minority groups in Somalia that conforms to basic human rights, respects their culture and provides them with equal chances compared to other Somalis.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Germany) for providing me with a great research environment for 10 years until October 2013.

Notes

1. Somali clan and place names in this text follow Somali orthography. The Latin 'c' stands for the Arabic 'ع' (ayn); 'x' denotes 'ح' (ha).
2. This literally means 'people of Hamar'—Hamar (meaning 'red') being an old name for Mogadishu.
3. Schlee (2013, 262–263) stressed that under Somali customary law the differential fighting power of the groups in conflict was taken into consideration and stronger groups had a better chance to get 'their rights'.
4. The Raxanweyn agro-pastoralists in the regions Bay and Bakool also suffered from the militias clashing over the control of their fertile land. However, since the Raxanweyn are not counted as a minority group, they are not dealt with in this article.
5. Still, the courts entailed a clan element and initially many of their members belonged to the Hawiye clan-family.

References

- Ahmed, Ali Jimale, ed. 1995. *The Invention of Somalia*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press.
- Amnesty International. 2009. *Human Rights Challenges: Somaliland Facing the Future*. London: Amnesty International.
- Besteman, C. 1995. "The Invention of Goshu: Slavery, Colonialism and Stigma in Somali History." In *The Invention of Somalia*, edited by A. J. Ahmed, 43–62. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press.
- Besteman, C. 1996. "Representing Violence and 'Othering' Somalia." *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1): 120–133. doi:[10.1525/can.1996.11.1.02a00060](https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.1.02a00060).
- Besteman, C. 1999. *Unraveling Somalia. Race, Violence and the Legacy of Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Besteman, C. 2012. "The Somali Bantu in a State of Refuge." *Bildhaan* 12: 11–33.
- Cassanelli, L. V. 1982. *The Shaping of Somali Society. Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People 1600–1900*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cassanelli, L. 1995. *Victims and Vulnerable Groups in Southern Somalia*. Ottawa: Immigration and Refugee Board.
- Compagnon, D. 1992. "Political Decay in Somalia: From Personal Rule to Warlordism." *Refuge* 12 (5): 8–13.
- Declich, F. 2010. "Can Boundaries Not Border One Another? The Zigula (Somali Bantu) between Somalia and Tanzania." In *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, edited by D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne, 169–186. Woodbridge: James Currey.
- De Waal, A. 1997. *Famine Crimes. Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Gundel, J. 2009. *Clans in Somalia*. http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1261130976_accord-report-clans-in-somalia-revised-edition-20091215.pdf.
- Helander, B. 1995. "Vulnerable Minorities in Somalia and Somaliland." *Indigenous Affairs* 2: 21–23.
- Hill, M. 2010. "No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities." Minority Rights Group International. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/DCAF9B4C12ED9AC8C12577E4004A9973-Full_Report.pdf.
- Hoehne, M. V. 2009a. *Counter-Terrorism in Somalia, or: How External Interferences Helped to Produce Militant Islamism*. <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/somalia/>
- Hoehne, M. V. 2009b. "Mimesis and Mimicry in Dynamics of State and Identity Formation in Northern Somalia." *Africa* 79 (2): 252–281. doi:10.3366/E0001972009000710.
- Ingiriis, M. H., and M. V. Hoehne. 2013. "The Impact of Civil War and State Collapse on the Roles of Somali Women: A Blessing in Disguise." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7 (2): 314–333. doi:10.1080/17531055.2013.776281.
- Joint fact-finding mission by the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Immigration Service, 14–27 March. 2007. *Human rights and security in central and southern Somalia*. https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/F382C881-5A67-4605-845F-953B98E01355/0/somali-arapport_humanrights.pdf.
- Kirk, J. W. C. 1904. "The Yibirs and Midgaans of Somaliland — Their Traditions and Dialects." *Journal of the Royal African Society* 4 (13): 91–108.
- Laitin, David D., and Said S. Samatar. 1987. *Somalia. Nation in Search of a State*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Landinfo 2009. *Reer Hamar*. http://www.landinfo.no/asset/1091/1/1091_1.pdf.
- Lewis, Ioan M. 1961. *A Pastoral Democracy. A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, Ioan M. 1998. *Saints and Somalis: Popular Islam in a Clan-Based Society*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press.
- Lewis, Ioan M. 1998 [1955]. *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar, and Saho*. London: HAAN.
- Luling, V. 1984. "The Other Somali: Minority Groups in Traditional Somali Society." In *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies, Vol. IV (Studies in Humanities and Natural Sciences)*, edited by T. Labahn, 39–55. Hamburg: Buske.
- Luling, V. 2006. "Genealogy as Theory, Genealogy as Tool: Aspects of Somali 'Clanship'." *Social Identities* 12 (4): 471–485. doi:10.1080/13504630600823692
- Luling, V. 2010. "Farmers from Arabia: The Role of Gibil Cad Groups in the Interior of Southern Somalia." In *Milk and Peace, Drought and War. Somali Culture, Society and Politics*, edited by M. V. Hoehne and V. Luling, 301–317. London: Hurst.

- Menkhaus, K. 2010. "The Question of Ethnicity in Somali Studies: The Case of Somali Bantu Identity." In *Milk and Peace, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics*, edited by M. V. Hoehne and V. Luling, 87–104. London: Hurst.
- Mohamed, J. 2007. "Kinship and Contract in Somali Politics." *Africa* 77 (2): 226–249. doi:10.3366/af.2007.77.2.226.
- Prunier, G. 1995. *Somalia: Civil War, Intervention and Withdrawal 1990–1995 UN Writenet Paper*. http://www.asylumlaw.org/docs/somalia/country_conditions/Prunier.pdf.
- Report on minority groups in Somalia by the joint British, Danish and Dutch fact-finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya, 17–24 September. 2000. <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/0317E0EF-BB21-493F-A41C-1E0BD6D49EE5/0/FactfindingmissiontoKenyaSomalia2000tildanskjemmeside.pdf>.
- Samatar, A. I. 1992. "Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (4): 625–641. doi:10.1017/S0022278X00011083.
- Schlee, G. 2013. "Customary Law and the Joys of Statelessness: Idealised Traditions Versus Somali Realities." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7 (2): 258–271. doi:10.1080/17531055.2013.776276.
- Schlee, G., and I. Schlee. 2010. *Limits to Political Engagement: The Case of the Somali Diaspora*. Working Paper No.125. Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.
- Van Lehman, Dan, and Omar Eno. 2003. *The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.

MARKUS V. HOEHNE is a Lecturer at the Institute of Anthropology at Leipzig University.

ADDRESS: Institute of Anthropology, Leipzig University, Schillerstraße 6, 04109 Leipzig, Germany. Email: markus.hoehne@uni-leipzig.de